DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 230 HE 020 063

AUTHOR	Stanford, Serena W.
TITLE	Dissertations and Theses Roles Highlighted at Annual Meeting Session. California State University System's Thesis in Master's Degree Programs Discussed.
INSTITUTION	Council of Graduate Schools in the U.S., Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Feb 87
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, One Dupont Circle, Suite 430, Washington, DC 20036-1173.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
JOURNAL CIT	Communicator; v20 n1 p1-2,11 Jan-Feb 1987
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Programs; Comparative Analysis; Conferences; Departments; *Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Masters Theses; School Surveys; *State Universities
IDENTIFIERS	*California State University; Council of Graduate Schools

ABSTRACT

The role of the thesis in graduate education at the 19 campuses of the California State University (CSU) was surveyed. It was found that a minimal number of disciplines at CSU restrict the choice of culminating the degree with the thesis. Only 15% of the programs systemwide force the thesis. The comprehensive examination was as popular as the thesis in English, psychology, and mathematics, while the thesis was the prevailing option in business and the sciences. The professional degrees, with the exception of engineering, tend to stress the project (applied research). Engineers opt for the thesis or the exam. From 1981-82 through 1985-86, the proportion of master's degrees for which the thesis was the culminating experience remained steady at 27% for the CSU system as a whole. However, thesis-related master's degrees ranged from 12% to 68% of the degrees at individual campuses. According to CSU graduate deans, the value of the thesis experience included: exploring an issue in depth, engaging in independent work, meeting standards of professional publication in the discipline, and preparing the student for doctoral education. Problems associated with the thesis were also identified. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

cgs in the U.S. Communicator

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

CGS

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

VOLUME XX, NO. 1 JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1987

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Dissertations and Theses Roles Highlighted at Annual Meeting Session

California State University System's Thesis in Master's Degree Programs Discussed

Given the size of the California State University system, the practices regarding master's theses on its various campuses were of great interest to those attending a concurrent session dealing with the roles of both theses and dissertations in graduate education at the CGS 26th annual meeting held in San Antonio, December 2–5, 1986. The following presentation on the California State University System was made by Dr. Serena W. Stanford, Interim Associate Academic Vice President, Graduate Studies and Research, San José State University.

ED279230

The California State University is the largest system of senior higher education in the nation with 19 campuses, over 324,000 students and 19,100 faculty. The CSU offers more than 1,500 bachelor's and master's degree programs in some 240 different subject areas, plus teaching and school service credentials. Within the California State Master Plan for Education, now 25 years old, the CSU is primarily a teaching institution; we offer only a limited number of doctoral degrees jointly with the University of California and with private universities in California. However, we grant a third of the master's degrees awarded by California colleges and universities. In 1985 alone, the CSU granted 9,100 master's degrees; historically, the master's degree represents approximately 20 percent of all degrees awarded by the system.

San José State is one of the larger CSU campuses, with 25,000 students, one fifth of whom are post-baccalaureate candidates for the master's degree or a school credential. SJSU is unique in its service area of California's Silicon Valley, but in other respects SJSU is quite similar to sister institutions within the system. We have diversity in programs, some difficulty in maintaining quality control over the master's degree, and a large collection of perceptions about the role of the thesis that are shared by the majority of the CSU campuses. Therefore, what is reported here may be enlightened by specific examples from San José State, but represents the results of a survey of all 19 campuses of the CSU regarding the role of the thesis in graduate education.

The survey was just completed in November of this year. The questions had less to do with numbers than with impressions of graduate deans regarding the thesis as a culminating experience. This type of information had never been aggregated before, so the cooperation from all 19 campuses was gratifying.

The collected responses reveal that a minimal number of disciplines in the CSU restrict the choice of culminating experience to the thesis. Only 15 percent of the programs systemwide force the thesis, with the highest proportion only 25 percent on any single campus. In the extraordinary variety of disciplines encompassed by the CSU, most master's programs offer the thesis, the project, the comprehensive examination, exhibition or performance in the creative arts . . . or a combination of these options. There are some surprises in the data, however: the comprehensive examination is as popular as the thesis in English, psychology, and math while the thesis is the prevailing option in business and the sciences. The professional degrees, with the exception of engineering, tend to stress the project (applied research). Engineers opt for the thesis or the exam.

(continued on page 2)

Inside

Minorities—future talent pool 3
Thomas Linney brings 1987 problems into focus 4
26th annual meeting photos and awards 6,7
Regional affiliate meetings 6
Peter Syverson highlights Education Dept.'s graduate enrollment report 8
Open Doors released with graduate data 9
Mrs. Arlt presents memorabilia to CGS 9
1987 CGS Board and Nominating Committee 10

REMINDER . . .

The Council is still seeking nominations and applications for both the CGS Dean in Residence, and CGS Minority Dean in Residence positions for the 1987–88 academic year (see November, 1986 *Communicator* for full descriptions).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HE 020 063

Master's Theses

(continued from page 1)

Many of the graduate deans had expressed some concern regarding what was perceived to be the declining popularity of the thesis as an alternative. The data indicate those perceptions are in error. From 1981–82 through 1985–86, the proportion of master's degrees for which the thesis was the culminating experience has remained steady at 27 percent for the CSU system as a whole. However, there are wide variations across the campuses; thesis-related master's degrees range from 12 to 68 percent of the degrees at individual campuses and there is no pattern relating the proportion of theses to the size of the campus, the age of the campus, or the number of degrees issued. At San José State, the thesis proportion hovers around 20 percent, which is common to the larger campuses in the system. SJSU offers a significant number of professional degrees (the MLS, MPH, MSW, etc.), as do the other large CSU schools. Since these programs stress the project or a comprehensive examination, there is a natural limit to the number of theses generated.

What value is there in the thesis experience? Most of the CSU graduate deans stressed the student's opportunity to explore an issue in depth, to engage in independent work, to synthesize classroom experience so that a research topic could be defined and a study executed, to meet standards of professional publication in the discipline, or to prepare for doctoral education. One quote provides succinct expression of this view: "Graduate education is inherently hollow without a strong research component."

Complementary values were attributed to the project (applied research) and to the comprehensive examination. The project was seen as inherently investigative, an exercise in creativity specific to a single problem and its resolution, an example of practical application of theory learned in the classroom. The comprehensive exam addressed the ability to write and provided an assessment of subject matter mastery by demonstrating the student's breadth of knowledge. By one of the graduate deans, it was termed "an expedient," appropriate for those who need to know the field but will not do research (e.g., the teacher). By another, it was defended as being "broader in scope and more useful than the development of a restricted, limited topic."

There is, then, a consensus within the system that the thesis provides an in-depth research experience, whatever else it may do. Opinion was evenly divided regarding the perceived difference between the rigor of the thesis and other alternatives. There was some concern that both students and faculty avoided the thesis because faculty were unwilling to take responsibility in a system which has difficulty providing incentive for thesis advisement as a recognized part of academic assignment. However, much of the difference of opinion centered on the issues of discipline (professional fields are not keen on the thesis) and time.

The overwhelming majority of the graduate deans agreed that less capable students did *not* avoid the thesis. The issue was not capability but, again, time. There were several "horror stories" regarding faculty disagreements about the thesis or refusal to read the work, but most comments were reminders that CSU serves working students for whom graduate education comes at a high price in personal effort. At San José State, for example, 80 percent of the graduate students are part-time, with an average 7-unit load per semester; in this respect, SJSU is not unique in the system. Most graduate students are married and work full time to support families; the average age is 33. Given alternatives of an

(continued on page 11)

TABLE 1

NUMBERS OF DEGREES AND THESES, 1981–82 THROUGH 1985–86

Campus	1981–82	1982–83	1983–84	1984–85	1985–86
Chico (Degrees)	216	225	241	208	193
(Theses)	137	153	165	115	92
Fresno	353	474	439	396	371
	132	175	173	116	128
Fullerton	678	726	782	690	697
	114	107	108	119	115
Hayward	371	408	426	477	458
	90	82	95	67	70
Humbolt	144	141	121	105	129
	92	91	72	80	100
Long Beach	760	757	720	632	717a
	284	303	280	289a	289a
Los Angeles	902	893	943	838	824
	188c	188c	188c	188c	188c
Northridge	704	664	621	614	616
	298	286	273	269	260
Pomona	335	330	304	296	270
	66	75	53	67	67
Sacramento	723	726	690	696	700
	123b	123b	117b	118b	119b
San Bernardino	244	230	255	244	246
	38	38	14	21	37
San Diego	1155	1143	1109	998	1059
	277a	277a	277	285	269
San Francisco	967	1104	1024	883	952
	289	302	309	212	282
San Jose	875	873	869	804	872
	202a	202a	201	195	209
San Luis Obispo	204	161	156	181	159
	36	40	49	51	69
Stanislaus	154	109	160	116	75
	48	31	54	37	24
TOTAL DEGREES	8785	8984	8860	8178	8338
TOTAL THESES	2414	2473	2428	2229	2318
PERCENT THESES	.27	.27	.27	.27	.27

NOTE: Data were not provided by Bakersfield, Dominguez Hills or Sonoma. Range of degrees per campus per year: 75–1155. Range of thesis percentage per campus: 12–68%.

a—Figures based on average for years in which data available.

b—Figures based on proportion of programs requiring thesis (probably underestimates true number of theses).

c—Figures based on combined total for 1983–84 through 1985–86.

Master's Theses

(continued from page 2)

examination or project that is finite in its time obligation vs. a thesis whose data collection and analysis could extend into months, the choice is obvious to many of our students. What is surprising is that 27 percent continue to elect the thesis when only 15 percent of the programs give no other alternative.

In this environment of part-time students, without a real sense of community in graduate education as most of us have experienced it in our doctoral programs, what are the problems of quality control that surround the thesis? First, the majority of the CSU campuses have no policies specifying the criteria that govern eligibility of faculty who may serve as thesis advisers. Several have prepared guidelines regarding the role of the thesis adviser, but there is generally no "graduate faculty" within the CSU system. At virtually all of the campuses, the graduate dean has the final authority to approve the thesis; several of the graduate deans have official "readers" as budgeted members of the staff, but most do the reading themselves or share the burden with an associate dean.

In rank order, problems associated with the thesis are writing (spelling, grammar, punctuation), format, and content (quality of research, methodology). At San José State, there is no policy regarding the scope of the thesis review by the graduate dean, but the consensus is that content is "off-limits," the province of the professionals in the discipline. When that general principle is violated, it is done with some trepidation and with extraordinary tact; however, it *is* done and the majority of the graduate deans in the CSU agree that it *must* be done. Yet none wants to discourage the faculty from investment in the research process through thesis advisement; in fact, there is general agreement that the faculty participate in thesis work because they feel an obligation to students first and foremost. At some, but by no means all of the campuses, faculty also receive reduced teaching loads, support thesis work through research grants, and enjoy joint publication potential. However, the primary motivation is professional and is thoroughly consistent with the overall teaching mission of the CSU system.

The thesis in graduate education within the California State University, then, is a discipline-related option, is an exercise in research depth rather than breadth, and is elected by students in substantial numbers that exceed the proportion for whom it is a mandatory graduation requirement. Thesis advisement is clearly supported by the faculty as a professional obligation but has only tangential connection to academic load within the system. It presents some quality control problems to graduate deans because there is no general policy regarding criteria for faculty who serve as thesis advisers. It is a fair guess, based on the consistency of its presence as a culminating experience in the CSU, that the thesis will remain a viable alternative in the foreseeable future, in spite of the fact that the CSU serves a graduate student clientele for whom time is literally money. There are some reasonable negotiations regarding appropriate faculty reward for thesis service that need to be pursued within the CSU system as a whole, but the thesis is *not* the intellectual anachronism that many graduate deans had feared. •

TABLE 2

CULMINATING EXPERIENCES FOR THE MASTER'S DEGREE: NUMBER OF CSU PROGRAMS REPORTING OPTIONS AVAILABLE

Discipline	Thesis	Project	Comp Exam
Agriculture	3	1	2
Anthropology	10	3	5
Art/Music (a)	10	10	3
Biology	16	2	6
Business	14	7	9
Chemistry	11	1	2
Computer Science	8	5	3
Criminal Justice	5	2	2
Education	16	14	10
English	11	7	12
Engineering	10	5	8
Foods/Nutrition	5	1	3
Foreign Language	4	2	8
Geography	9	2	7
Health Science	4	4	3
History	5	2	4
Industrial Arts/Tech	6	4	3
Journalism	5	2	2
Math	6	5	9
Nursing	8	3	2
Philosophy	2	0	2
Physical Education	14	8	8
Physics	5	0	4
Political Science	10	5	7
Psychology	12	4	5
Public Administration	11	6	10
Social Work	4	4	1
Sociology	8	4	1
Speech	11	5	10
Theater Arts	7	7	3

(a) Art/Music programs frequently offer the exhibition or performance as culminating experiences.

The *Communicator* is published monthly except in July and December and distributed by the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States as a regular member service. Inquiries and comments may be directed to the editor:

Edna M. Khalil
Council of Graduate Schools
in the United States
One Dupont Circle,
Suite 430
Washington, D.C.
20036-1173
Phone: (202) 223-3791